

IDDN'T SIGN UP TO DE: Teacher, Staff, and Parent Voices on Reopening Schools



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Background

The chaos of the "back-to-school" season in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic has upended the lives of parents, students, and teachers. And Black, Brown, and underresourced communities have been <u>hit the hardest</u>. But unequal access to education is nothing new. For years, public schools across the country have lacked the funding and resources needed to ensure that all students, and especially under-resourced students and students of color, receive the quality education they deserve. Crumbling school buildings, lack of broadband access, lead in the drinking water, and <u>underpaid</u> educators are just a few of the challenges many communities have long faced. Now, the long-term chronic education crisis is being compounded by the immediate crisis of the pandemic.

Any approach to school reopening must recognize that simply returning to the status quo is not the answer. We must make real investments now that center equity, address systemic racism, and allow us to build a more just education system moving forward.

We have to acknowledge, we really have two pandemics. We have the pandemic of COVID-19 and then we have the pandemic of systemic racism that has been with us since the beginning of the country. And of course, the result of those twin pandemics is, sadly, tragically, unjustly, disparate impact on kids and families of color. -John King Jr., The Education Trust

Policymakers can start by developing a national plan to get the virus under control and dedicating sufficient funding to ensure the safety of our students and school personnel. In the absence of national leadership, school reopening nationwide has been characterized by chaos and danger, with parents, students, and educators living in fear of contracting the virus, and for thousands of students across the nation that is exactly what has happened. While some schools are reopening for online instruction only this fall, other schools across the nation <u>opened</u> their physical doors in August, even as the number of coronavirus cases nationwide topped <u>six million</u>.

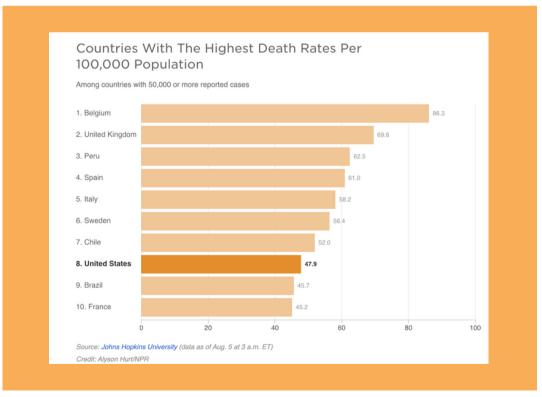
During the same period of time, coronavirus cases among children skyrocketed, with a record <u>100,000 cases</u> reported in children in just two short weeks. According to an <u>analysis</u> by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association, more than 380,000 total COVID-19 cases reported are among children. From July 9, 2020 to August 9, 2020 there was a <u>90 percent</u> increase in cases among children with nearly 180,000 reported cases in just one month.

In some <u>states</u>, schools that reopened scrambled to quickly shut back down after students and school staff were diagnosed, trying to avoid a super-spreader nightmare. As of August 17, 2020, <u>more than 2,000 students, teachers, and other school staff were forced to</u> <u>quarantine</u> after at least 230 COVID-19 cases were reported in just five states including Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Indiana. It is a catastrophe in the making to send educators and children back to school in states where the virus is surging. And those who are pushing for it are attempting to pit parents and children against educators, and to blame educators and their unions, in order to distract from the months they've spent denying and downplaying the virus, instead of fulfilling their obligation to provide the resources and conditions educators and students desperately need.

-President Randi Weingarten, AFT

In Florida, nearly <u>9,000 children</u> have been infected with COVID-19 in just 15 days in August as schools reopened. In a shameless effort to keep COVID-19 outbreaks under wraps, some school administrators in Georgia were sending <u>confidential emails</u> to staff who contracted the coronavirus instructing them not to notify any other staff members, students, parents, or anyone else with whom they have been in contact. This cover up has left school faculty, parents, and students on the Florida border scrambling for information about how to keep themselves and their students safe — by word of mouth and on local Facebook groups.

As other countries are on their way to <u>containing</u> the coronavirus and returning to normal life, the U.S. continues to struggle with surging COVID-19 infections and a failed administration response. Now, the U.S. has the world's highest number of deaths, and the world's eighth-highest death rate per capita – <u>47.93 deaths per 100,000 people</u> – in the world. The Administration's inadequate response and politicization of the pandemic have hobbled our economy and cost us tens of thousands of lives, especially in under-resourced communities and communities of color.



 ${\tt SOURCE: } \underline{\tt https://www.npr.org/sections/goats and soda/2020/08/05/899365887/charts-how-the-u-s-ranks-on-covid-19-deaths-per-capita-and-by-case-count} \\ \underline{\tt case-count}$

Despite numerous public health experts' consensus that schools simply <u>cannot</u> reopen until the virus is contained, the Trump Administration has continued to pressure schools to reopen, and <u>threatened</u> to withdraw federal funding from those that decline. Following pushback from the Trump Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) <u>issued</u> new guidelines with <u>edits</u> from the White House that downplayed the risks of reopening schools. In the <u>absence</u> of a national plan from the Trump Administration to contain the virus, the resulting chaos and spike in school-related infection rates is not surprising.

For the foreseeable future, virtual instruction is the only way to keep communities safe in many parts of the country. Yet, students' ability to continue learning successfully at home is deeply tied to their socio-economic status and race. Students of color or under-resourced students and families are more likely to have parents who work outside the home, more likely to be facing grief from losing a loved one to COVID-19, more likely to experience trauma, more likely to attend severely under-resourced schools, and less likely to have internet access or a computer in the home.

Helping students, parents, and educators survive this crisis requires an honest examination of the failures of our education system and a renewed commitment to real investment in a high-quality education for every child.

66 People will die if we do this wrong. People have died in places like Arizona where they did it wrong, where they listened to a politician instead of a doctor and instead of a teacher.

-Lily Eskelsen Garcia, NEA President 2014-2020

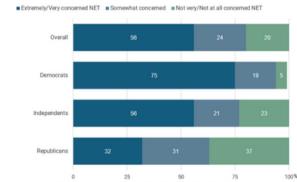


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-Lily Eskelsen Garcia, NEA President 2014-2020

PUBLIC OPINION ON SCHOOL REOPENING

On August 12, 2020, a POLITICO/Morning Consult poll found a majority of Americans - 59 percent - were opposed to fully reopening schools this fall for inperson learning. This is an increase from the Associated Press/NORC poll that found 53 percent of Americans were opposed to reopening schools just last month. In particular, that poll found 46 percent of Americans believed significant changes needed to be made in schools to properly handle the pandemic while 31 percent of Americans felt that schools should not re-open for in-person learning. Although President Trump and Republican officials have politicized this crisis and claim things are under control, the poll found that 80 percent of respondents, including more than three-in-five Republicans, were at least somewhat concerned with reopening schools this fall. Another poll released on July 23, 2020 by the Kaiser Family Foundation also found that a majority of the public -71 percent – said that public schools in their neighborhoods need more resources to reopen safely while 66 percent of parents had the same concern about their own child's school.



Majority of Americans concerned that reopening schools would cause virus surge

Question: How concerned are you that K-12 schools reopening for in person instruction would lead to additional people in your community being infected? Searce: AP-NORC poll conducted July 16-20, 2020, with 1.057 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

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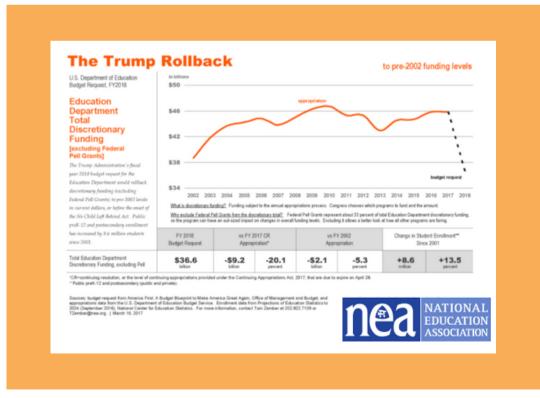
SOURCE: https://apnorc.org/projects/concerns-about-school-re-openings-loom-large/

A Pandemic Within a Pandemic

Chronic Underfunding and Persistent Inequality Undermine Schools' Response to the Coronavirus Crisis

Gutted Funding

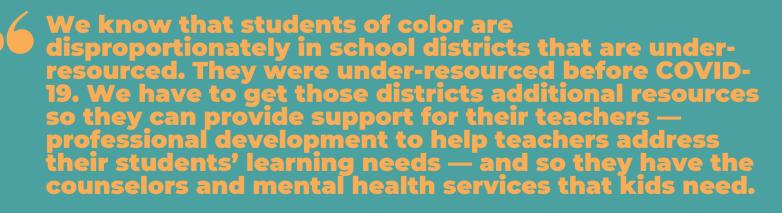
U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a long-time <u>proponent</u> of allowing private schools and corporations to profit off of education, and President Trump have <u>downplayed</u> the risks that our students and educators will face from in-person instruction. She even <u>falsely</u> <u>claimed</u>, without evidence, that children are 'stoppers' of COVID-19 and that they cannot be infected and transmit it themselves. In March 2017, Secretary DeVos supported President Trump's outrageous proposal to cut <u>13.5 percent</u>, or \$9 billion, of the funding for the Department of Education, which was rejected by the then Republican-controlled Congress. Two years later, Secretary DeVos <u>fought</u> for a voucher bill to invest \$50 billion in private school vouchers and announced she will <u>"no longer enforce a provision in federal</u> <u>law that bars religious organizations from providing federally funded educational services</u> <u>to private schools."</u> Needless to say, President Trump and Secretary Betsy DeVos have spent their time in office working to gut public education and divert funding to private schools including a <u>voucher-like competitive grant program</u>.



SOURCE: https://educationvotes.nea.org/2017/03/16/presidents-budget-advances-trump-devos-agenda-starve-privatize-public-schools/

COVID-19 is exacerbating the school funding crisis as schools face new pandemic-related expenses at the same time that state and local governments experience steep declines in the local tax revenue that funds our schools. The CARES Act. which was signed into law on March 27, 2020, included \$30.5 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund to support local school systems and higher education institutions. But with millions of Americans facing a deadly virus, no child care, and unprecedented job losses, the Secretary of Education has chosen to prioritize the use of federal funds intended to provide relief to families and their children to push her longtime agenda to privatize education. Secretary DeVos used \$180 million of those funds to encourage states to create "microgrants" for educational services, including private school tuition. The U.S. Department of Education also released its Equitable Services to Students and Teachers in Non-Public Schools rule, ostensibly to force states to allocate more coronavirus aid relief for what they call "equitable services" to all schools but primarily benefits local private school students. This is yet again another effort from Secretary DeVos to divert much needed federal funds from public schools to private education. Two federal judges, U.S. District Judges Barbara J. Rothstein and James Donato, have ruled against Secretary DeVos and blocked the U.S. Department of Education from implementing or enforcing the rule.



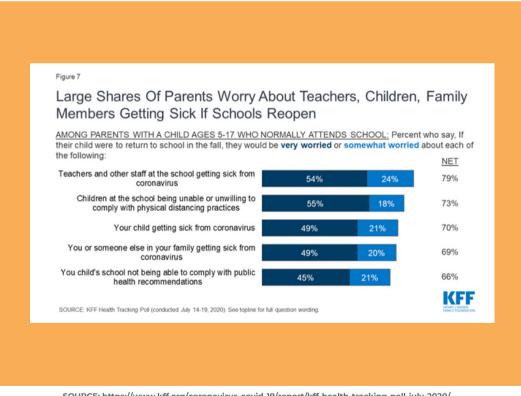


-John King Jr., The Education Trust

Racial and Income Inequities

The pandemic is also exposing existing racial and economic inequalities within our schools. <u>Communities of color are already disproportionately affected by COVID-19</u>. As discussions about reopening schools continue, parents of color and those from underresourced backgrounds are <u>more concerned</u> than other parents, which may be in part because they are less able to access additional support structures for their children. Structural racism embedded within our economy means that families of color are <u>less</u> <u>likely</u> to have jobs that allow parents to work from home and support online instruction. Families of color are also less likely to have internet access. Structural racism within our school systems means that children of color are disproportionately funnelled into underresourced schools with fewer options to support student learning remotely.

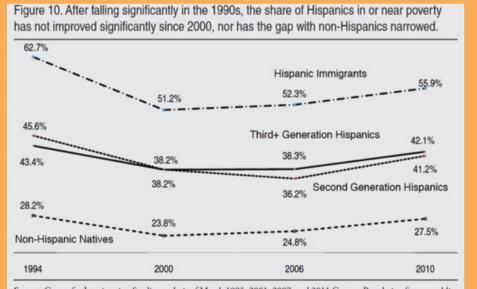
When some school districts announced their plans to keep schools virtual this fall, some wealthier parents began organizing "learning pods" also known as "<u>pandemic pods</u>." These <u>pandemic pods</u> are small groups of children that gather every day and learn together through online instruction generally supervised by a hired private teacher, tutor, or another adult. The disparities in parents' access to such supports will <u>only widen</u> the opportunity gaps between disadvantaged, under-resourced students and wealthier, privileged students.



SOURCE: https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-july-2020/



Immigrant parents who may struggle with a language barrier or unfamiliarity with U.S. school bureaucracy face additional challenges. When parents or guardians are not fluent in English, they may not be able to assist students with their homework or communicate effectively with their children's teachers and school. Immigrant communities and other communities of color are also facing higher infection rates than predominantly white communities, compounding the risk posed by in-person instruction. In addition, nearly one in four immigrants and children of immigrants live in poverty, meaning many immigrant families, especially Latinx families, do not have access to the computers or internet service they need to manage online learning. Immigrant parents are disproportionately represented in frontline jobs where working from home is not possible, leaving many families without a safe place for children to learn virtually while their parents are at work. Without a safe plan to reopen schools with adequate funding and resources, children, especially under-resourced children, English Language Learners, and children of color, will be denied their chance to learn.



Source: Center for Immigration Studies analysis of March 1995, 2001, 2007, and 2011 Current Population Survey publicuse files, which ask about income in the prior calender year. All figures are for adults (18+). The first generation are themselves immigrants (foreign-born), members of the the second generation have either an immigrant father or mother, and members of the third generation have two U.S.-born parents. In or near poverty is defined as under 200 percent of the poverty threshold.

SOURCE: https://cis.org/Report/Immigrants-United-States-2010#10

Disparities In Access to Broadband Service

At the beginning of the crisis, as businesses and schools moved online, fast and reliable internet access became even more critical. Yet, as many as <u>42 million Americans</u> do not have access to broadband internet in their homes, especially in rural areas. At the time, some internet service providers offered free internet access to support families transitioning to remote learning. Troublingly, many of these programs have <u>already</u> <u>expired</u>. Without internet access or computers, students must struggle to complete homework from a shared smartphone, drive to school parking lots, or just miss out on instruction entirely. Schools have turned to providing tablets and hotspots to students, photocopying homework packets and even <u>instruction on local PBS stations</u> to try to reach students.

We know that 79 percent of white families have reliable access to the internet and only 66 percent of Black families and 61 percent of Latino families have access. So in school districts where learning is happening through distance or hybrid, the schoolhouse door is barred for kids because they do not have internet access. We've got to solve that. In the wealthiest country in the world, we can solve that.

-John King Jr., The Education Trust

During the June 10, 2020 <u>Senate Health Education Labor and Pension (HELP) Committee</u> <u>hearing</u>, educators and advocates expressed the need for connectivity and equipment as schools reopened and families adjusted to a new way of learning. In the hearing, former Secretary of Education under President Barack Obama, John King Jr. said that Congress needs to invest at least <u>\$6 billion</u> in expanding broadband access to both K-12 and college students for the upcoming school year.

Unequal access to broadband internet service denies people of color and many underresourced families with the chance to obtain a safe and high-quality education. Only 66 percent of Black households and only 61 percent of Latinx households had <u>broadband</u> <u>internet service</u> compared to 79 percent of other households before COVID-19. The Census Bureau estimated that just <u>slightly over half</u> of Native American families living on tribal land had broadband internet access in 2018. In the hard hit Navajo Nation, only <u>40 percent</u> of families have internet access, let alone broadband internet. Nearly a <u>quarter of all</u> <u>immigrants</u> live in poverty and are <u>less likely</u> to have access to home internet service. This is especially for <u>Latinx immigrants</u>. For families to receive the quality education they deserve during these difficult times, billions of dollars needs to be invested into broadband access, technology grants for schools and families, and funding for remote learning.

Challenges Facing Students with Special Needs

Younger students, students with learning disabilities, English Language Learners, students experiencing homelessness, and deaf or blind students face additional challenges accessing their education during a pandemic. Schools must include all students in their planning and provide instruction options that serve the needs of students with special needs including finding ways for students who are not safe at home to learn somewhere safe, providing meals, and providing different forms of instruction for students who need them.

In the past decade, the number of students enrolled in special education programs has risen by 30 percent and about <u>14</u> <u>percent</u> of all public school students received some special education services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As school districts are left to identify the best practices for special education programs and ways to fund them, the National Education Association (NEA) has <u>advocated</u> for "a free, appropriate public education for all students with disabilities in a least restrictive environment, which is determined by maximum teacher and parent/guardian involvement."



Impossible Choices

Parents' Struggles

COVID-19 turned our lives upside down and has left working parents facing <u>impossible</u> <u>choices</u>. One in five working-age adults <u>reports</u> being unemployed because their child care has been disrupted by the pandemic, and among those who are currently out of work, women are three times as likely as men to report that the reason is because they are at home caring for children.

How do they decide to send their children back to school before it's safe so they can get back to work to make ends meet? How do they juggle online instruction and remote work? Overall, <u>59 percent</u> of Americans are concerned that reopening schools would cause a virus surge and worry about sending their children back to in-person learning.

These dilemmas are not the result of the pandemic, they are the result of policy choices. We can provide families with the support to stay home until it's safe. We can provide teachers and schools with the resources and support they need to succeed at online learning or reopen safely. We can ensure that every teacher has the equipment, training, and PPE they need to reopen. There are other solutions to keep families safe and financially secure until it's safe to return to in-person school

Decisions around schools returning to in-person instruction should be driven by science, not the pressure to restart the economy. The mass economic upheaval in the U.S. is not inevitable. Other developed countries have controlled the spread of the virus effectively and avoided deep economic disaster by providing workers and employers with support until it was safe to reopen, instituting strict and enforceable safety standards, and providing ongoing direct assistance. Instead of asking parents to put their economic stability or their children's education on the line, the government should implement policies that support businesses and family incomes.

Since the pandemic began, more than <u>50 million workers</u> have filed for unemployment insurance. And while White unemployment rates have trickled down somewhat, the <u>Black</u> <u>and Hispanic unemployment rate remain stubbornly high</u>, in part because Black and Hispanic workers are less likely to be able to work from home. This is yet another manifestation of structural racism in our economy.

With limited opportunities for work, no plans to reopen schools safely, and the end of the additional \$600 of federal pandemic unemployment benefits in July, parents are left with very few options to support their families and ensure their children receive the quality education they deserve while staying safe and healthy.

How to Reopen Safe and Just Schools

Centering Working People's Voices in Safety and Health

Educators and families agree that students must get back to school – but this should only happen if schools get the time and resources they need to plan and reopen safely. As President Trump and Secretary DeVos rush to recklessly reopen schools without safety precautions in place, educators are fighting for safe, science-based plans that return to inperson learning only once it is safe and provide the resources schools need to make those plans a reality.

Implementing Safety Standards

The <u>Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)</u> protections do not cover employees of public schools and public institutions of higher education in 24 states. That's almost half of the country where workers in public school settings are not covered by any OSHA standards. Additionally, most states <u>do not</u> have sufficient occupational safety standards for schools. Without any strong safety standards or protections in place, teachers, staff, and students will not have clear safety guidelines or the ability to force schools to follow the best public health guidelines for needs like PPE and procedures for how to respond to exposure to the virus. Public schools need enforceable public safety standards or they cannot be held accountable for not protecting their students, staff, and teachers when they inevitably are exposed to the virus.



66 We need to have parents and teachers on the ground contouring it and making those decisions [to reopen schools safely].

-President Randi Weingarten, AFT

Building Educator Power

As lawmakers struggle to make decisions about when and how to reopen classrooms, teachers' unions are on the forefront of the fight to ensure teachers are heard and are involved in the process. Teachers across the nation are <u>"fighting for longer school closures, stronger safety requirements and limits on what they are required to do in virtual classrooms.</u>" As of 2016, the majority of teachers — <u>about 70 percent</u> — were union members. The second-largest teachers' union in the country, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), announced on July 28, 2020 that it will stand behind their <u>1.7</u> <u>million</u> members if they choose to strike in districts and states that reopen classrooms without the proper health and safety measures in place.

Local, state, and national unions and organizations have come together to form a coalition, Demand Safe Schools, "to unite students, educators, parents and community to advance a racial justice agenda in public education." They are demanding that schools do not reopen until scientific data

supports it, for police-free schools, that schools are provided with the resources and funding to ensure safe conditions, support for communities and families, equitable access to online learning, and more. These demands align with what millions of concerned parents and educators are asking for across the country.

The AFT and NEA are pushing for schools to wait to reopen classrooms until coronavirus transmission rates drop <u>below</u> <u>lpercent</u> and average daily test positivity rates fall <u>below 5 percent</u> in a community. Unions are also <u>pushing</u> for effective <u>testing and contact tracing</u>, mask requirements for both students and teachers, <u>updated ventilation systems</u> more than half of school districts need significant building repairs — in school buildings, and social distancing procedures including requiring all individuals to maintain six feet of distance between each other.

NEA AND AFT'S PRINCIPLES FOR SCHOOL REOPENING

The National Education Association (NEA), which represents more than 3 million educators nationwide, has laid out a plan to reopen schools, focused on four core principles: health expertise, educator voice, access to protection, and leading with equity. Similarly, the AFT released its plans to safely reopen schools and communities focused on five main pillars based on science and public health guidance as well as the expertise of educators and health practitioners: maintaining physical distancing, ramping up the capacity to test, trace, and isolate new cases, deploy public health tools, involving workers, unions, parents and communities in all planning, and investing in recovery. Although President Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos are pressuring schools to fully reopen, they have not presented a clear plan for ensuring the safety of students, families, and educators. Clear, enforceable standards based on public health data and evidence must be in place to resume in-person learning at all levels of education. The lack of clear standards and waiving the liability of school districts, as the Administration has encouraged, will put students, staff, and teachers at risk and do further damage to children's education.



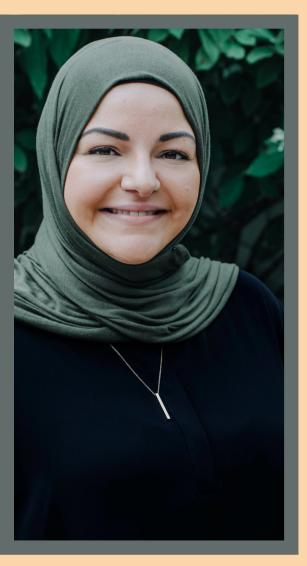
As some state officials announced their plans to reopen schools for in-person learning, teachers and leaders were already taking the fight to the streets and in court. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis and Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran signed an executive order on July 6, 2020 <u>ordering</u> schools to fully reopen, five days a week starting in August. This, as Florida was on the verge of becoming the pandemic <u>epicenter</u> of the world. The AFT and NEA along with their local affiliate, the Florida Education Association, <u>filed a lawsuit</u> against Governor DeSantis over his order accusing him of "violating a Florida law requiring that schools be 'safe' and 'secure.'" They requested that the state court in Miami block the governor's reopening order and allow the experts, school superintendents, and health departments, to make decisions over reopening schools.

In the midst of the pandemic, educators have legitimate concerns about returning to the classroom and must be included in the decisions made on behalf of themselves and students. Educators also deeply understand the challenges they face in both online and inperson instruction. Teacher unions are standing strong and empowering their members to organize and push to be included in the decisions being made to reopen schools and prioritize the health and safety of everyone involved. Instead of teachers advised to <u>prepare their wills</u> and contemplating quitting their jobs as they are excluded from the decision making process, they must be heard and included in the process.

One of the number one questions we're getting from our members, these are the family of educators — teachers, librarians, the school nurse, the school secretary, the custodians, the lunch ladies, all of the folks it takes to serve those kids — they're asking us if we have wills, like forms that we can send them. They're making out their last will and testament instead of putting up bulletin boards.

- Lily Eskelsen Garcia, NEA President 2014-2020

LISTENING TO TEACHERS: Zeinab Chami's Story



After several years in the world of nonprofit advocacy, I decided to leave my career to obtain my masters degree in teaching in order to better serve my community. I am entering my 10th year of teaching at my alma mater, Fordson High School, a Title 1 school in Dearborn, MI, a close neighbor to Detroit. In 2019, I was one of 15 educators statewide appointed to the newly-formed Michigan Governor's Educator Advisory Council. The GEAC identifies and examines educational policy issues and, working closely with the Michigan Department of Education, makes recommendations about said policies to Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

I entered into this field to teach in a poor immigrant community because, as a product of working-class immigrants myself, I believe wholeheartedly that education is the great equalizer. I teach in the third-largest district in the state, where our schools are overcrowded and underfunded. Our students' needs are endless. They are food insecure, and many do not have internet or devices on which they can work at home. So many of my students act as translators for their family members (I had a student miss a post-shutdown video class session because he was filling out a Medicaid application for his uncle and lost track of time). These are the kids I serve with great pride. But if our district makes the safe choice and moves to online education. things will not be easy for our kids. Beyond internet and devices, our students need guiet spaces in which to work, and, most difficult to provide in a remote scenario, adult support. The only way to provide the latter is to substantially decrease class sizes, giving each teacher more one-on-one time with every student, but we know that the opposite is likely to happen in poorer districts (the class size in Royal Oak High School, a more affluent school 25 minutes down the road from me, is capped at 22. Our class sizes are capped at 30, but we often have 32 or more).

The chronic underfunding of schools in poor communities has exacerbated already painful disparities in our society. Recently, I attended statewide trainings hosted in districts more affluent than mine. Walking into these schools where students had more room to breathe, more flexibility in movement, and a modern space conducive to learning made me sad for my own students and poor students around the country, who struggle in dilapidated buildings with often unsafe infrastructure issues. These beautiful schools are in districts that are predominantly white and wealthy. The funding disparities — the result of an anti-public school governor in the '90s who was a close croney of the DeVos family — are real, with the state's richest urban/suburban district having a baseline budget that is 150 percent that of other districts. It's heartbreaking to see that, rather than being the great equalizer, public education in America has come to reflect all of our socioeconomic inequities.

We are at a crossroads. I do believe that a truly just and equitable model for public education is possible, but now is the time to press the reset button. If we don't push for real and radical reform, our schools will continue to be just another institution that oppresses poor folks and minorities in this country.

You have to, in a community, maintain the stay at place orders and the physical distancing orders until the number of cases decline for 14 days. In the absence of a vaccine, you have to actually have the least amount of virus in a community.

-President Randi Weingarten, AFT

Centering Racial Equity While Reopening Schools

In addition to experiencing higher rates of infection and death during this pandemic, communities of color face structural inequities that have already put children of color at a great disadvantage, including underfunded schools, racist testing instruments, and lack of access to technology. <u>Educators of color</u> are concerned about what will happen to their students and how they can continue to serve their students while protecting themselves. For example, students of color tend to test lower during fall standardized testing when compared to the spring because many of these children lack the resources and support over the summer to do well at the beginning of the school year. The rushed end to the

STATES' ROLE IN SUPPORTING SAFE REOPENING

In addition to a clear plan and adequate funding, organizations such as the Education Trust are urging state leaders to ensure students have equitable access to learning opportunities during COVID-19 school closures. To ensure school districts with the most vulnerable students have equitable access to the resources and support they need to succeed in school, especially during COVID-19, the Education Trust is calling on states to take these important steps: create and maintain centralized and clear communication to community stakeholders, maintain and strengthen critical support for vulnerable students and their families, provide guidance and resources to districts on educational services for vulnerable populations, support districts to develop short- and long-term solutions to address COVID-19 challenges, and ensure federal stimulus funds are distributed and used equitably.

school year last spring and the lack of clear and comprehensive plans for virtual instruction will only deepen these inequities. Educators of color need to be included in the ongoing decision making and evaluation process about reopening schools and working towards education equity.



LISTENING TO PARENTS: Jessica Juarez Scruggs' Story

These last few months have been impossible, and I know my family is so much better off than so many of our neighbors. Having two children at home while I work from home means juggling conference calls and zoom Kindergarten, realizing I haven't brushed their teeth at 3pm, far too much screen time and far too many sleepless nights as I frantically try to get through the tasks I couldn't finish during the day. It's grinding and demoralizing and I feel like I'm at my wit's end. The other day, my three year old daughter was playing with her stuffed animals and she told them "Hang on honey, I'm working, I don't have time." My heart just shattered because I know I've said that to her 1,000 times over the last few months.

Beyond the struggle to get through the day, I worry. I worry about our family getting sick, especially since my husband is an EMT. I worry about their learning and development. My son was just beginning to read and now it's a daily fight to force him to read a line or two. And while we argue with him about doing his reading, my daughter runs wild and doesn't get the attention she needs. I worry about how this trauma and isolation will shape their young lives, about how much to tell them, about whether to listen to the news in front of them. I worry about it all.



Our school is really trying to do this right. They've engaged parents, staff, and teachers from day one and they've been really thoughtful about how to make sure every kid at our school can learn. They got chromebooks for every kid who didn't have a home computer and they are providing limited in-school supervised learning for children who are experiencing homelessness or who don't have someone to be home with them during the day. I'm so grateful that our school has done so much, but this should be how EVERY school operates. It's disgustingly predictable — the disaster in our schools is falling on the shoulders of poor kids and Black and Brown kids. Our kids and families and teachers are not disposable.

It feels like we're all alone, struggling to make the best decision between heartbreaking options. But we aren't alone. We've been set up to fail by the choices the Trump Administration is making and we have to stand together.

The Urgent Need for Legislative and Executive Action

Advocacy groups and lawmakers across the country are calling on the Trump Administration to provide schools with the resources, funding, and plans to reopen safely as COVID-19 continues to spread. National and local organizations, advocates, parents, and teachers, including the NEA and AFT, are calling on Congress to pass two key pieces of legislation: the Heroes Act and the <u>Coronavirus Child Care and Education Relief Act</u> (CCCERA).

We [educators] love our students and we want to figure out how to support our students. We need help from Congress. We need help on stabilizing school district budgets and funding for safe reopening, we need funding for internet access, we need funding for counselors and mental health services.

- John King Jr., The Education Trust

Efforts to Rebuild America's Schools Prior to COVID-19

Over a year before this pandemic hit, chairman of the Education and Labor Committee Congressman Bobby Scott (D-VA) and Congressman Donald Norcross (D-NJ), along with Senator Jack Reed (D-RI), <u>introduced</u> the <u>Rebuild America's Schools Act</u>, a proposal that will invest more than \$100 billion in America's public schools if it becomes a law by creating a \$70 billion grant program and \$30 billion tax credit bond program targeted at high-poverty schools. Prior to COVID-19 there was already a <u>\$46 billion nationwide shortfall</u> in annual funding for public school infrastructure and the pandemic has only exacerbated the many issues public schools already face. This important legislation would provide school districts with the necessary funds to help address critical physical and digital infrastructure needs in schools, including updating ventilation systems. On July 1, 2020, the Rebuild America's Schools Act was <u>passed</u> in the House as a part of the \$130 billion infrastructure package, the <u>Moving Forward Act</u>. The Senate has yet to move on this bill.



Key Provisions in Coronavirus Relief Packages

The Heroes Act includes \$915 billion in funding to support teachers and school staff and includes \$90 billion in stabilization aid for K-12 and higher education, which would be used to save 800,000 education jobs and cover the additional costs of providing PPE, sanitization and cleaning supplies, and giving support to families harmed by COVID-19. Instead of the Senate Republicans voting on the Heroes Act and supporting the positive provisions that provide public schools with the resources and funding needed to reopen safely, they stalled for months. In July, Senate Republicans introduced the HEALS Act. which fails to address the crisis public schools and families face. The HEALS Act

allocates only \$70 billion for elementary and secondary schools, including proportional funding for private schools. If this becomes law, one-third of the funds would be available immediately but the remaining two-thirds of the funds are tied to the reopening of schools, creating pressure for schools to restart in-person instruction before it is safe in order to secure the basic funds they need to keep teaching our children. Negotiations on the next COVID-19 relief package fell through when Democrats and Republicans could not come to an agreement on how to provide Americans with the relief and support they need during these difficult times. Since then, President Trump has signed executive orders for short-term temporary relief that does not do nearly enough to address the scale of the crisis. His efforts do not include any plan or funding to safely reopen schools.

Another important solution is to pass the <u>Paycheck Recovery Act</u> into law. This legislation, <u>introduced</u> by Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal on May 19, 2020, would deliver working people and businesses immediate relief by empowering the federal government to directly cover up to 100 percent of base payroll costs for salaries up to \$90,000 per worker. The Paycheck Recovery Act would give businesses the support to make it through closures, keep workers hired and on health insurance, boost the economy, and give parents the opportunity to stay home with their children until it's safe. If signed into law, the Paycheck Recovery Act will provide parents with the support they need to care for their children and not have their pay disrupted.

Congress must also immediately reimplement the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) program for people who have already been laid off. The CARES Act boosted unemployment insurance payments for people who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 by about \$600 a week. This supplement was a critical lifeline that allowed many families to make ends meet and the only income for many gig workers, contractors, and others who do not qualify for traditional insurance. The FPUC <u>ended</u> on July 26, 2020 for all states leaving millions of people without much needed benefits and no job to turn to. If the <u>Heroes Act</u>, which passed the House on May 15, 2020, is signed into law it will extend the FPUC through January 31, 2021.

After months of refusing to consider the Heroes Act, the Republican controlled Senate introduced their HEALS Act, which does not provide an extension of the FPUC and reduces the federal unemployment insurance supplement to a mere \$200 a week through October 5, 2020. Under the Senate Republicans plan, from October 5, 2020 to December 31, 2020 the federal unemployment insurance supplement to state unemployment insurance payments will be capped at \$500 a week to replace 70 percent of an unemployed workers' prior wages. The HEALS Act will significantly reduce the unemployment insurance supplement that many families rely on if it becomes a law.

The Trump Administration later issued a presidential memorandum that purports to provide <u>\$300 per week in benefits</u>, but this memo is unworkable for states, potentially illegal, and benefits will not reach workers for weeks or months, if at all.



Legislation from Senate Democrats

On June 20, 2020, Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) introduced the CCCERA, which will provide <u>\$430 billion</u> in relief for students, families, schools, and educators and <u>\$175 billion</u> in stabilization aid for K-12 schools and <u>\$12.9 billion</u> in funding for services to K-12 students disproportionately affected by COVID-19 if it becomes a law. The bill also includes safeguards that will prevent Secretary DeVos from restricting student access to emergency financial aid, diverting funds away from public schools, and using funds for "micro-grants" that advance her school privatization agenda. Siphoning public funds to private education will only deepen inequities and harm already under-funded public schools. Advocacy groups across the country including the NEA are demanding Congress pass this legislation.



Lawmakers Demand the Trump Administration Take Action

On July 10, 2020, Senator Kamala D. Harris and Congresswoman Katie Porter <u>demanded</u> that the Trump Administration "develop clear and concise standards that include the input of health experts, teachers, parents, and students to help schools reopen only if and when it is safe to do so." They sent a <u>letter</u> to Trump officials stating the Administration has failed to provide basic guidance to schools and demanded the Administration provide guidance with input from public health experts on safe reopening.

Congress must take action to provide states with the funds and support they need to guide their school districts to reopen schools safely by prioritizing the health and safety of children, families, educators, and other school staff, as well as ensuring resources are distributed equitably.

Conclusion

The Trump Administration's negligence and poor response to the pandemic has left our students and educators especially vulnerable to COVID-19. The out of control spread, high death toll, and economic devastation are the result of policy choices, not an inevitable consequence of the pandemic. With summer break ending, students and educators are facing the frightening prospect of risking their lives to attend school. If COVID-19 infections caused by inadequate safety in schools create new waves of infection, schools will be forced to shut down quickly once again.

Without thoughtful and science-driven plans in place, any schools that begin in-person instruction are gambling with the lives of teachers, school staff, children, and of entire communities. Rushing to return to "normal" will not help our students learn or our economy get back on its feet. Instead, it will cause needless trauma and disruption for our children and school employees. We must prioritize safety and equity and give schools the resources they need to make the best possible plans in a difficult situation.

ABOUT THE PROGRESSIVE CAUCUS ACTION FUND

The Progressive Caucus Action Fund ("the PCAF") is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit that is working across the progressive movement to unite stakeholders around common goals, build infrastructure, secure real policy wins, and amplify the successes of progressive champions nationwide.